Flight Delays and Cancellations Continue as Major Sources of Customer Dissatisfaction

Between 1995 and 1999, the number of air travelers rose nearly 16 percent, from about 582 million to 674 million, and according to FAA forecasts will exceed 1 billion by 2010. Similarly, the total number of domestic flights scheduled by the 10 major Airlines increased nearly 3.8 percent, from approximately 5.3 million to 5.5 million. These trends continued into 2000, with the same Airlines reporting nearly a 3 percent increase in scheduled domestic flights and a 4 percent increase in the number of passengers over 1999. With this growth has come increases in delays, cancellations, and customer dissatisfaction with air carrier service. There is no single solution to the growing problem of delays and the resulting consumer concern over air travel. Solutions to these problems rest on a multifaceted approach that involves FAA, air carriers, and airports.

Vital Statistics Show How Serious the Situation Has Become

- In 2000, over 1 in 4 flights (27.5 percent) were delayed, canceled or diverted, affecting approximately 163 million passengers.

- Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS)[8] data show departure and arrival delays increased 33 percent (1,863,265 to 2,486,103) between 1995 and 2000. Likewise, FAA[9] reported that delays increased 90 percent (236,802 to 450,289). Flight cancellations grew at an even faster pace during this time period, increasing 104 percent (91,905 to 187,317).

- Over the last year, BTS data indicated an increase of nearly 19 percent (2,089,998 to 2,486,103) in departure and arrival delays. Likewise, FAA reported an increase of over 20 percent (374,116 to 450,289) in delays. Flight cancellations also increased, rising over 21 percent (154,311 to 187,317) between 1999 and 2000.

- Not only are there more delays, but those occurring are longer. Of those flights arriving late, the average delay exceeded 52 minutes in 2000.

[8] Airlines that account for at least 1 percent of domestic scheduled passenger revenues submit monthly reports to BTS, which are used, among other things, to determine the percentage of flights departing and arriving on time by airport. BTS counts a flight as on time if it departed or arrived within 15 minutes of scheduled gate departure (aircraft parking brake released) and arrival (aircraft parking brake set).

[9] FAA collects data on flight delays via the Operations Network (OPSNET). FAA personnel manually record aircraft that were delayed for 15 minutes or more after coming under FAA's control, i.e., the pilot's request to taxi-out.

- Most delays occur on the ground. On flights to and from 55 major U.S. airports, FAA reported approximately 83 percent of total delay time during the first 11 months of 2000[10] occurred during gate departure (49 percent), taxi-out (26 percent), and taxi-in (8 percent).

- Based on BTS data for the 30 largest U.S. airports, the number of flights experiencing taxi-out times of 1 hour or more increased 165 percent (from 17,331 to 45,993) between 1995 and 2000. Flights with taxi-out times of 2, 3, and 4 hours increased at even higher rates of 217, 289, and 341 percent, respectively, during this same period.

Number of Flights with Taxi-Out Times of 1 to 5+ Hours, 1995-2000 (BTS Data)

Time Period	1995	2000	% Change
1-2 Hrs.	15,220	39,019	156%
2-3 Hrs.	1,697	5,376	217%
3-4 Hrs.	313	1,219	289%
4-5 Hrs.	68	300	341%
5 or > Hrs.	33	79	139%
Total:	17,331	45,993	165%

- Flights experiencing taxi-out times of 1 hour or more increased nearly 13 percent (from 40,789 to 45,993) between 1999 and 2000. Of those flights with taxi-out times of 2, 3, 4, and 5 hours or greater, the largest percentage increase occurred in the 5+ hour category, which more than doubled (from 30 to 79).

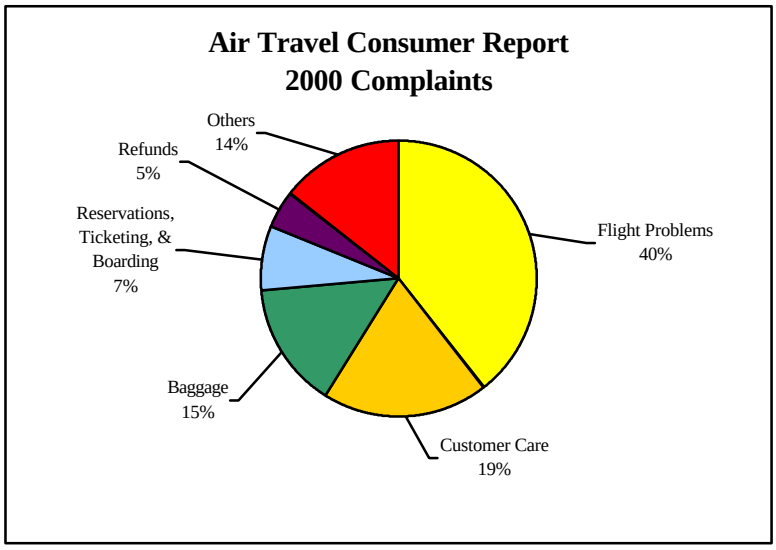
- Scheduled flight times mask actual growth in delays. To compensate for longer ground and air times, the 10 major Airlines have increased their flight schedules on approximately 83 percent (1,794 of 2,167) of their major domestic routes between 1988 and 2000, ranging from 1 to 26 minutes.

- Moreover, the number of arrival delays tracked by BTS would have increased over 28 percent (from 1,356,450 to 1,740,620) if the Airlines' scheduled flight times in 2000 had remained at their 1988 levels.

Consumer Complaints Signal a High Degree of Dissatisfaction With Air Carrier Service. Against this backdrop of increasing delays and cancellations, consumer complaints are also rising. The 2000 DOT Air Travel Consumer Report disclosed that consumer complaints against for 2000 increased 14 percent (20,438 to 23,381) over complaints in 1999. Over the last several years, DOT has ranked flight problems (i.e., delays, cancellations and missed connections) as the

[10] At the time of our review, FAA did not have taxi-out and taxi-in data for December 2000.

number 1 air traveler complaint, with customer care[11] and baggage complaints ranked as either number 2 or number 3. As depicted by the chart, 2000 data show that these three types of complaints account for 74 percent of all complaints received by DOT against the airline industry.



Reducing Delays and Customer Dissatisfaction With Air Travel Requires a Multifaceted Approach. There has been much debate over the last year as to the role Airline scheduling played in causing delays—especially at the larger Hub airports during peak periods of operation. Questions being debated include whether Airline scheduling discussions for specific airports should be permitted under antitrust supervision, whether peak-hour pricing (if legal) will provide meaningful relief, and whether implementing a lottery for airport usage (such as New York's LaGuardia) will work. Clearly the Airlines cannot solve the delay and cancellation problem themselves, since many factors lie at its cause, but they should be doing their part.

Last year, before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, we reported[12] that the key question is what traffic load the air traffic control and airport systems can reasonably be expected to accommodate in the short, intermediate, and long term. FAA needs to explain in clear terms the extent to which the air traffic control modernization effort can be expected to provide material relief to the current problem of delays and cancellations. This is because much of the modernization effort is not geared to making quantum leaps in increasing capacity. The answer lies in a cumulative mix of solutions—scheduling and technology are among them. However, the role played by ground infrastructure (runways and airports) is of enormous importance, mainly because of the large impact that ground infrastructure has on capacity. This is further complicated by the fact that decision-making associated with building and locating a new runway or a new airport requires clearance by local communities.

[11] Complaints such as poor employee attitude, refusal to provide assistance, unsatisfactory seating, and unsatisfactory food service are categorized as customer care complaints.

[12] Flight Delays and Cancellations, September 14, 2000, Report No. CC-2000-356.